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JOHN F. COLLINS
Mayor

Richard J. Sinnott
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BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN F. COLLINS - MAYOR OF BOSTON

To John F. Collins, challenges are nothing new; he has had them throughout his life. Nor are they things to be feared, but to be faced and conquered. And he has done that, too, meeting and defeating every obstacle in the path of his goal of public service for the public good.

Challenge has brought Collins hardship and pain--but never discouragement--and instead of quitting it only makes him work the harder to overcome it. That one fact helps measure the man.

The 47-year-old Mayor was born in Roxbury, and obtained his education in the local schools and Suffolk University. He topped his class at Suffolk, won his law degree Cum Laude, and at 21--the youngest age at which a person can be admitted to the Massachusetts Bar--he became a practicing attorney.

But before his career became far advanced, the United States entered World War II, and John F. Collins put aside his work in the law to join the Army Infantry in defense of the freedom on which all law is based.

When he was discharged four years later, he was a Captain in the Counter-Intelligence Corps.

On his return to Boston at war's end, Collins had two ambitions, one to win public office and the other to win the hand of Mary Patricia Cunniff. He realized both in short order, being elected a State Representative in 1946 and getting married on September 6, 1947.

Both careers entailed challenges of one sort or another--and in both he has been a success.

He served two terms in the House and two more in the State Senate--but his greatest challenges, as a man and as a public servant, were still before him.

In 1955, with a record of never having lost a city or county election behind him, John F. Collins became a candidate for the City Council of Boston.

That was the year of the great polio epidemic, and shortly before the campaign for nomination reached its peak, John and Mary Collins took their four children, Mary Patricia, John Frederick, Thomas, and Margaret, to Cape Cod for a holiday. It was the first vacation the family had had--and a time that should have been happy was instead a time of tragedy.

And a time of challenge.

The children were stricken by polio and, several days later, so was their father. They recovered with no lasting effects, but he was almost totally paralyzed.

He was near death, and prospects of his recovery were so slim that the best hope his doctors could give him was that, if he survived, he would face a lifetime of complete inactivity.

It was then less than two weeks before the primary election, and John F. Collins was advised to withdraw from the campaign. But his illness was a challenge--and Collins would not let it defeat him.

He stayed in--and he won. He won again in November, despite the fact that he was bedridden, and promised the voters that he would be present at the first meeting of the new Council.

The promise seemed impossible of accomplishment, but Collins delights in accomplishing the impossible, and when the new Council was called together, John F. Collins was there.

He never missed a meeting as long as he was a member, and gave up his seat only when he was called by Governor Foster Furcolo to fill an unexpired term as Register of Probate for Suffolk County.

Had Collins wished, he could have remained there for the rest of his life for, although it is an elective office, it is considered a "safe" one, to which the incumbent is invariably re-elected.

But in 1959 he became a candidate for Mayor of Boston--because for many reasons the post represented a challenge.

The most immediate challenge was that State Senate President John E. Powers was considered the overwhelming favorite by many political experts and writers.

But the most important challenge was that Boston had plummeted from the days of its glory and was in the midst of a long and seemingly unstoppable slide toward mediocrity. Halting that slide, and helping the city he loved be reborn and take its rightful place in the nation,

was why John F. Collins gave up a "safe" position to run for Mayor.

Collins qualified for the November "run-off" election by finishing second to Powers in the primary. Again, he was given little or no chance to win, but Collins confounded the prophets by scoring a resounding victory.

With the immediate challenge overcome, Collins faced the far more formidable one of creating a "New Boston" from the decrepitude of the old. And there, too, he succeeded.

In each of his first four years as Mayor he succeeded in cutting the City's tax rate, even though Boston was confronted by rising costs and a shrinking tax base. In that period, Boston was the only major municipality to reverse the trend of spiraling property taxes.

But, equally as important, Boston regained its reputation for "civic probity and progress," and, under Collins, embarked on a vast program of urban renewal and other improvements. His conception of government was to "work with people," to give full weight to their wishes and needs, and to enlist their cooperation in what he was trying to do.

That they responded was demonstrated in 1963, when Boston was cited by Look Magazine and the National Municipal League as an "All America City," an award coveted by every community in the country.

And it was demonstrated again in November of that same year when Collins was re-elected to a second term by a massive margin.

His accomplishments as Mayor won him national attention and esteem. He was chosen president of the 15,000-member of the American Municipal Association and became a member of the powerful executive committee of the U. S. Conference of Mayors.

National magazines and centers of learning, which once had looked dimly on Boston, began to see the city and its Mayor in a different light.

On June 11, 1964, John F. Collins was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Laws degree by Harvard University, the first time in its 330-year history that Harvard had granted such a distinction to a Boston Mayor.

In that same month, Collins and Boston were the subjects of in-depth articles in two highly-reputed national publications--Fortune and Architectural Forum.

Fortune called him a "man with a Univac mind," credited him with "reversing the city's long slide toward squalor," and described him as "the chief mover in Boston's struggle to become once again one of the great cities of the world."

Architectural Forum saw Collins' "New Boston" as a combination of "men, projects, and an end to despair" and said that under him "Old Boston has plenty of new drama and excitement...and the city is being hauled out of its century-long slough."

Time Magazine featured John F. Collins on its cover, the first time a New England mayor had been so singled out, and in an accompanying

story described him as "the ablest Mayor Boston has had in a quarter of a century."

The Wall Street Journal called him "honest, intelligent, and dedicated," and Business Week labeled him the architect of "Boston's billion-dollar spending spree."

In all, since Mayor John F. Collins took office in 1960, he has been the subject of complimentary articles in seven national publications, plus a biography by the Associated Press which was carried in 400 newspapers. United Press International has also carried "By Line" stories by him.

Yet, though these honors are appreciated, though Harvard praised him as the "courageous rebuildder of an old Boston whose leadership has given the Hub a new spin," they are not the principal rewards of public service for John F. Collins.

The rewards come in knowing that the 16 hours he works each day have infused an old city with new vigor; the rewards come in the realization that the people of Boston are uplifted by an immense pride in what, with their help, has been done.

And the rewards come in the knowledge that new and exciting challenges lie ahead and that he, John F. Collins, is ready and willing-- and able-- to meet them.